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1 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Ideal head*.  
London, British Museum,  
inv. 1895,0915.493 r

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“DONNA BELLA E CRUDELE”  
MICHELANGELO’S  
“DIVINE HEADS”  
IN LIGHT OF THE *RIME*

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Lorenzo Pericolo

*Disegna in me di fuora,  
Com'io fo in pietra od in candido foglio  
Che nulla ha dentro, e èvvi ciò ch'io voglio.*<sup>1</sup>

Michelangelo's so-called *Ideal head* in the British Museum, London, defies description (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> Drawn in black chalk, the head of this beautiful woman, seen in profile, is adorned with an intricate hairstyle and a strange bonnet. Though akin to the extravagant examples displayed in numerous late fifteenth-century Florentine depictions of beautiful women, the combination of hair and adornment imagined by Michelangelo entails a puzzling superimposition of unidentifiable elements. Covered with scales, the bonnet rests on a transparent veil holding the hair net-like and almost imperceptibly touching the temple and part of the

cheek. Pouring forth from above the temple, a torrent of hair flows into a massive braid, criss-crossing the lower side of the bonnet while creeping around the neck only to inexplicably disappear from view.

Atop the bonnet's skull, a ram-like horn springs forth, portentously kept in place by a decorated metal or fabric strip, which is crowned by a (now trimmed) winged cherub-face analogous in function to the sumptuous gemstones used for female hair dress in late fifteenth-century Italy. Only drafted, a filet lines the forehead, a strap circles the chin, and a second braid coils above the shoulder. It is perhaps irrelevant to attempt to determine how this entire decorative device holds together, but it is undeniable that, in its strangeness and subtle craftsmanship, it animates the severe profile of the woman by summoning up a wealth of

<sup>1</sup> Michelangiolo Buonarroti, *Rime*, ed. by Enzo Noè Girardi, Bari 1960, p. 63, no. 111 [294f.]. All the translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> On *Ideal head*, see Johannes Wilde, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: Michelangelo and His Studio*, London 1953, pp. 78f., no. 42; Frederick Hartt, *Michelangelo Drawings*, New York

opposing metaphors through an evocation of forms in suspended metamorphosis.

The locks on the woman's forehead rise and ebb like the waves of a leonine mane, although their turmoil appears to be tamed under the pressure of an all too light strip. The devilish horn on top of the bonnet both clashes with and complements the celestial face hovering over a feathery cloud of wings. The animal scales embellishing the bonnet both press and caress the veil underneath. Similar to a mighty serpent, the braid both encircles and protects the bare neck. What creature does this woman represent? Is she human or superhuman? A nymph or a warrior? Benign or malevolent? The interplay and fusion of opposites staged by Michelangelo in *Ideal head* does not truly qualify as poetic license, insofar as they are a requisite of the lyrical genre to which the drawing belongs.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, in poems and images inspired by Petrarch's lyrics, the woman is at once cruel and

merciful, portentous and beautiful, diabolic and angelic. "Per la donna bella e crudele" is the conventional phrase used in early modern editions of lyrical *canzonieri* to designate poems in which the theme of beauty and cruelty is developed.<sup>4</sup> Seen in this light, Michelangelo's *Ideal head* might be considered an offspring of the late fifteenth-century tradition of representing beautiful women in accordance with the conventions of lyric poetry.<sup>5</sup> And yet, when it comes to Michelangelo, very little, if anything, is conventional. Executed circa 1525–1528, *Ideal head* is a vestige: the late revival of a lyrical imagery that had marked the age of Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence, especially the 1470s, in a time when Michelangelo had not even been born or was only an infant.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Michelangelo was himself a lyrical poet, and he equally developed the theme of the beautiful woman in many of his verses.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, *Ideal head* is just one of the (visual) instances in which love is poetically celebrated by Michelangelo.

1970, pp. 259f., no. 365; Charles de Tolnay, *Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo*, Novara 1975–1980, II, pp. 94f., no. 316; John A. Gere, in: *Drawings by Michelangelo from the British Museum*, exh. cat., New York 1979, pp. 75f., no. 15; Nicholas Turner, *Florentine Drawings of the Sixteenth Century*, London 1986, p. 118, no. 83; Paul Joannides, *Michelangelo and His Influence: Drawings from Windsor Castle*, exh. cat., Washington 1996, p. 40, no. 2; Hugo Chapman, *Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master*, exh. cat., New Haven/London 2005, pp. 202–205; and Andreas Schumacher, *Michelangelos Teste Divine: Idealbildnisse als Exempla der Zeichenkunst*, Münster 2007, pp. 147–149 (as by Antonio Mini).

<sup>3</sup> As gifts, Michelangelo's "teste divine" are often construed as a part of and on a par with his "presentation drawings". Referring to both "divine heads" and "presentation drawings" as a homogeneous category, Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo and His Drawings*, New Haven/London 1988, p. 107, remarks that "the real parallel for these drawings of Michelangelo is love poetry, above all sonnets, actuated by profound personal feeling". In commenting on this statement, Elizabeth Cropper, "The Place of Beauty in the High Renaissance and Its Displacement in the History of Art", in: *Place and Displacement in the Renaissance*, ed. by Alvin Vos, Binghamton 1995, pp. 159–205: 196, rightly observes: "this relationship goes beyond parallels or analogy, having to do with a new phenomenological status of the work of art. Michelangelo, himself a great poet, was deeply engaged [...] in the thematics of the representation of desire for possession in both drawing and writing", adding that, "in the case of the *teste divine* [...] the very subject of the drawings was beauty itself". See further Schumacher (note 2), pp. 71f., who postulates lyrical implications only for Michelangelo's "presentation drawings".

<sup>4</sup> There is evidence that Luigi del Riccio and Donato Giannotti first, or Fulvio Orsini later, intended to employ the phrase to connote analogous poems by Michelangelo for a printed edition of the *Rime* never accomplished. See Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rime*, ed. by Giovanni Testori/Ettore Borelli, Milan 1975, pp. 15, 18f.

<sup>5</sup> On the relationship between lyric poetry and representation of beauty in sixteenth-century Italy, see Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women: Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style", in: *Art Bulletin*, LVIII (1976), pp. 374–394. For the "portrayal of love" and lyrical tradition in late fifteenth-century Florence see Charles Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent*, Princeton 1992, pp. 53–65 and 147–150.

<sup>6</sup> There is no study specifically consecrated to the depiction of the "beautiful and cruel woman" in late fifteenth-century Florentine painting and sculpture. A survey with bibliography on the representation of ideal female beauty as developed in the late fifteenth century not only in Florence, but also in other Italian cities, is to be found in Schumacher (note 2), pp. 222–236. See further Joanna Woods-Marsden, "Portrait of the Lady, 1430–1520", in: *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, exh. cat., ed. by David A. Brown, Washington, D.C., 2001, pp. 64–87, for a typological classification of female portraits mostly in fifteenth-century Italy.

<sup>7</sup> For Michelangelo as a poet, see Enzo Noè Girardi, *Studi su Michelangelo scrittore*, Florence 1974; Walter Binni, *Michelangelo scrittore*, Turin 1975; Glauco Cambon, *Michelangelo's Poetry: Fury of Form*, Princeton 1985; Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rime*, ed. by Giovanni Testori/Ettore Borelli, Milan 1990,

lo. Most importantly, Michelangelo in all likelihood conceived of the drawing as both a gift (a token of friendship and love) and a pedagogical tool (the verso of *Ideal head* is filled with sketches by a disciple and a few humorous vignettes by the master; Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> If one heeds Giorgio Vasari's cue, the sheet in the British Museum should be defined as a "divine head" ("testa divina"); on this count, *Ideal head* should be considered not an isolated composition, but part and parcel of a series of lyrical drawings created by Michelangelo in tandem with his amorous poems.

In the 1568 edition of his *Vite*, Vasari relates that Michelangelo "infinitely loved over all Messer Tommaso de' Cavalieri, a Roman nobleman, who, as a young man, was much inclined to these arts, and to teach him to draw Michelangelo made for him many drawings, most astonishing, executed in black or red chalk, of divine heads [*teste divine*], and then he drew him a Ganymede abducted to heaven by the bird of Jupiter, a Tityus whose heart is devoured by a vulture, the fall of the chariot of Phaeton in the Po, and a Bacchanal of putti, which each and all together are the rarest things and drawings to have ever been seen".<sup>9</sup> A few pages later, Vasari also records that Michelangelo had presented Gherardo Perini, "a Florentine nobleman who was a most dear friend, with three drawings of some divine heads in black chalk [*teste di matita nera divine*], which, after his death, ended up in the hands of the



2 Michelangelo Buonarroti and workshop, *Studies of heads and figures*. London, British Museum, inv. 1895,0915.493 v

pp. 5–17; James M. Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation*, New Haven/London 1991, pp. 1–61; and most recently William J. Kennedy, *Petrarchism at Work: Contextual Economies in the Age of Shakespeare*, Ithaca/London 2016, pp. 100–128.

<sup>8</sup> For works of art as gifts of friendship and love in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian art, see e.g. Ulrich Pfisterer, *Lysippus und seine Freunde: Liebesgaben und Gedächtnis im Rom der Renaissance oder: Das erste Jahrhundert der Medaille*, Berlin 2008.

<sup>9</sup> "[...] et infinitamente amò più di tutti messer Tommaso de' Cavalieri, gentiluomo romano, quale essendo giovane e molto inclinato a queste virtù, perche egli imparassi a disegnare, gli fece molte carte stupendissime, disegnate di lapis nero e rosso, di teste divine, e poi gli disegnò un Ganimede rapito in cielo da l'uccel di Giove, un Tizio che l'avvoltoio gli mangia il cuore, la Cascata del carro del Sole con Fetonte nel Po, et una Bacchanalia di putti, che

tutti sono, ciascuno per sé, cosa rarissima e disegni non mai più visti" (Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966–1997, VI, pp. 109f.). On Michelangelo's "presentation drawings", see more recently *Michelangelo's Dream*, exh. cat., ed. by Stephanie Buck/Tatiana Bissolati/Michael Bury, London 2010. See further Marcella Marongiu, "Tommaso de' Cavalieri nella Roma di Clemente VII e Paolo III", in: *Horti Hesperidum*, III (2013), I, pp. 257–319; *eadem*, "Le tre versioni della *Caduta di Fetonte*: cronologia e contesto", in: *Michelangelo als Zeichner*, conference proceedings Vienna 2010, ed. by Claudia Echinger-Maurach/Achim Gnann/Joachim Poeschke, Münster 2013, pp. 329–343; and *eadem*, "... perché egli imparassi a disegnare gli fece molte carte stupendissime": i disegni di Michelangelo per Tommaso de' Cavalieri", in: *Horti Hesperidum*, IV (2014), I, pp. 11–55. An essential reading remains Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Boul-

most illustrious Don Francesco, prince of Florence, who holds them for jewels, which in fact they are”.<sup>10</sup> Michelangelo’s gifts of drawings to his beloved Perini and Cavalieri must have been well known to contemporary connoisseurs. In a letter of November 1545, Pietro Aretino blamed Michelangelo for not having satisfied his requests for presents (“cose desiderate”), almost certainly drawings; by sending the requested gifts, Michelangelo, in Aretino’s self-interested opinion, would have dispelled the envious rumors that only “the Gherardos and the Tommasos could avail themselves of [his] services”.<sup>11</sup> The obvious allusion to Michelangelo’s weakness for Perini and Cavalieri suggests that the gift of drawings was perceived as a deliberate manifestation of the master’s love for these young men.<sup>12</sup>

Documentary evidence allows us to identify some of Michelangelo’s “divine heads” mentioned by Vasari. In his life of Properzia de’ Rossi, Vasari notes that “it is not long ago that Messer Tommaso Cavalieri, a Roman nobleman, sent to Signor Duke Cosimo (besides a drawing by the hand of the divine Michelangelo, where a Cleopatra is represented) another drawing by the hand of Sofonisba [Anguissola]”.<sup>13</sup> Bearing in mind

that, according to Vasari, Cosimo I’s son, Francesco, had come into possession of the three sheets with “teste divine” given by Michelangelo to Perini, it can be assumed that four of the six drawings by Michelangelo quoted in the inventory of the grand-ducal collection in 1560–1570 were considered by Vasari to be “divine heads”.<sup>14</sup> No doubt, these are the so-called *Zenobia*, *Study of three heads*, the so-called *Fury* (all three now in Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi), and the famous *Cleopatra* (now in Florence, Casa Buonarroti; Figs. 3–6).<sup>15</sup> The latter, as pointed out by Vasari, had once belonged to Cavalieri.<sup>16</sup> All of these drawings are executed in black chalk; with the exception of *Fury* (circa 1525), they all contain sketches on their versos and depict female heads mostly in profile. Only *Zenobia* (circa 1525) and *Cleopatra* (circa 1532–1534) are highly finished bust-length representations of women, though two faintly traced sketches appear on the recto of *Zenobia*: the head of a bearded man facing leftward (top right) and the face of a putto (bottom left). Of the four drawings, only two (*Cleopatra* and *Zenobia*) correspond to the typology and format of the British Museum *Ideal head*. In *Study of three heads* (circa 1525), the profile of a veiled old woman

der et al. 1972, pp. 171–230, esp. pp. 216–228. See further David Rosand, *Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation*, Cambridge 2002, esp. pp. 185–200.

<sup>10</sup> “[...] a Gherardo Perini, gentiluomo fiorentino suo amicissimo, in tre carte alcune teste di matita nera divine, le quali sono dopo la morte di lui venute in mano dello illustrissimo don Francesco principe di Fiorenza, che le tiene per gioie, come le sono” (Vasari [note 9], VI, p. 113).

<sup>11</sup> *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, ed. by Giovanni Poggi/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1979, IV, p. 216.

<sup>12</sup> On the diffusion and social relevance of homosexual affection and practices in Renaissance Florence, see James M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society*, New Haven 1986, and Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*, New York 1996.

<sup>13</sup> “E non è molto che messer Tommaso Cavalieri, gentiluomo romano, mandò al signor duca Cosimo (oltre una carta di mano del divino Michelagnolo, dove è una Cleopatra), un’altra carta di mano di Sofonisba, nella quale è una fanciullina che si ride di un putto che piagne” (Vasari [note 9], IV, p. 405). See further Cavalieri’s letter (20 January 1562) to Duke Cosimo de’ Medici: Michelangelo Gualandi, *Nuova raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura ed architettura*, Bologna 1856, III, pp. 22f.

<sup>14</sup> See Karl Frey, *Der literarische Nachlaß Giorgio Vasaris*, Munich 1930, II, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> On the so-called *Zenobia*, see de Tolnay (note 2), II, p. 90, no. 307; Hirst (note 3), pp. 107–109; Joannides (note 2), p. 44, no. 4; and Schumacher (note 2), pp. 151–153. On the *Study of three heads*, see de Tolnay (note 2), II, pp. 90f., no. 308; Hirst (note 3), pp. 107–109; Schumacher (note 2), pp. 146f. (as by Antonio Mini). On the so-called *Fury*, see de Tolnay (note 2), II, pp. 89f., no. 306; Hirst (note 3), pp. 107–109; Joannides (note 2), p. 53, no. 8; and Schumacher (note 2), pp. 158–160 (as by Antonio Mini) and pp. 237–240.

<sup>16</sup> On the so-called *Cleopatra*, see de Tolnay (note 2), II, p. 100, no. 327; Hirst (note 3), pp. 116f.; *idem*, *Michelangelo Draftsman*, Washington 1988, p. 116, no. 48; Alexander Perrig, *Michelangelo’s Drawings: The Science of Attribution*, New Haven/London 1991, pp. 44f. (as an ancient copy after Michelangelo); Pina Ragionieri, *Michelangelo: le due Cleopatre*, exh. cat., Perugia/Spoleto 2005, esp. pp. 25f.; and Schumacher (note 2), pp. 160–162 (as possibly by Antonio Mini) and pp. 199f. Vasari’s identification of the figure in the drawing as Cleopatra may result from his familiarity with prints such as the *Cleopatra* (1515) by Agostino Veneziano after Baccio Bandinelli. I thank Charles D. Robertson for this suggestion.



3 Michelangelo Buonarroti,  
*Zenobia*. Florence, Gallerie degli  
Uffizi, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe,  
inv. 598 E r



4 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Study of three heads*. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, inv. 599 E r



5 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Fury*. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, inv. 601 E

with a grim expression contrasts with the adjacent two profiles of beautiful women adorned with fantastic hairstyles and headdresses. The representation of the old woman, as well as that of the screaming man in *Fury*, indicate that the label of “divine” conferred upon these compositions by Vasari does not refer to their subject matter. In praising Michelangelo’s drawings for Cavalieri in his 1550 *Vite*, Vasari declares that their craftsmanship was such that “even with one’s breath one could not achieve more accord [*unione*]”.<sup>17</sup> Vasari’s

<sup>17</sup> “[...] che col fiato non si farebbe più d’unione” (Vasari [note 9], VI, p. 113).

terminology implies that Michelangelo, god-like or on par with the Platonic demiurge, forms his images as if by ‘insufflation’, thereby effacing the traces of his manual labor; through deft rubbing, outlines and hatchings morph into shape and relief, into light and shade modulated with ethereal softness. The “teste divine”, then, are heads (and not portraits) executed with divine artistry.<sup>18</sup> Vasari does not seem to include in the definition the quick sketches (by Michelangelo or otherwise) executed on the verso of some of these

<sup>18</sup> See Schumacher (note 2), pp. 50–55, and in particular Cropper (note 3), p. 200.



6 Michelangelo Buonarroti,  
*Cleopatra*. Florence, Casa  
Buonarroti, inv. 2 F r

drawings, or even on the recto (for instance, in *Zenobia*). It is the high degree of achievement and the exceptional delicacy of the “heads” that makes them worthy gifts for an adored beloved.

Given the relative diversity of themes treated by Michelangelo in his “divine heads”, it would be tempting to downplay their lyrical dimension. Even though it cannot be ruled out that visual motifs present in these drawings that seem extraneous to the celebration of the beautiful woman may still relate to Michelangelo’s lyrical imagery, the task of this essay is only to investigate the meaning of those full-size “divine heads” in which the notion of beauty and cruelty is elaborated upon, and to thereby demonstrate to what extent these drawings subtly and profoundly interact with Michelangelo’s poetic activity: it is no exaggeration to claim that Michelangelo radically transforms the scope and definition of the lyrical genre both in image and verse. As a corollary, the remarks at the end of the essay are meant to explain how the initial function of the “divine heads” might have been subsequently fulfilled by Michelangelo’s representations of the dead Christ, both in his poems and works. It is noteworthy that the depiction of beautiful women as “teste divine” concerns an extremely limited portion of Michelangelo’s activity as a draftsman: their production apparently begins in the mid 1520s and culminates around 1532. From this point of view, the “divine heads” are a relatively mature expression of Michelangelo’s art and their invention seems to have been triggered exclusively by his late passion for Perini and, especially, Cavalieri.<sup>19</sup>

Before going any further, however, it is important to briefly reflect upon the ways in which the “teste divine” are presented to the beholder (and initially,

to their addressees, the young men cherished by Michelangelo). As previously noted, almost none of these drawings is fashioned as an independent composition; in addition to occasionally bearing on the verso the marks of Michelangelo’s didactic enterprise (through the lingering presence of some pupil’s clumsy trials), the sheets preserve (deliberately) the characteristic of being working material: an extemporaneous output conducted almost mechanically, on a whim.<sup>20</sup> The “divine heads” seem therefore to have suddenly surfaced from Michelangelo’s imagination, urging the master to give them life, quietly and tyrannically fixing themselves on the blank side of a used sheet or in whatever space remained among previous sketches. With prodigious lucidity, the raptured hand, abandoning all hesitation, has accordingly composed a tremendous *testa*, so softly drawn that apparently no tool could have implemented it: the *testa* is breathed onto the paper and is therefore *divina*. Of course, the genesis of these drawings as reconstructed here is largely a fiction. How Michelangelo truly proceeded in creating his affectionate gifts matters little; what is important to understand is that, by resorting mostly to already-employed sheets, Michelangelo aimed to give the impression that his “divine heads” participated in an ongoing creative operation, constituting a significant point, though not necessarily a definitive apex, of the process. As a result, the “teste divine” are mostly showcased as having interrupted, or disrupted, Michelangelo’s work: they even make an irruption into his pedagogic activity. In the same vein, and with impeccable calligraphy, Michelangelo sometimes transcribes his verses on the blank areas of sheets previously used for sketching and teaching. Poems and “divine heads” hence emerge on the paper in mutual analogy: both may be staged

<sup>19</sup> Hartt (note 2), pp. 259–264, includes, in a section titled “‘Divine Heads’: Florence and Rome, 1528–34”, seven drawings, among which the British Museum *Ideal head*. None of the other “teste divine” in the Uffizi or the Casa Buonarroti appear in this section. Similarly, de Tolnay (note 2), II, pp. 97–100, nos. 320–327, creates a section of “Teste Divine”. For the distinction between “teste divine” and “presentation drawings”, see above, note 3.

<sup>20</sup> In this regard, see William E. Wallace, “Instruction and Originality in Michelangelo’s Drawings”, in: *The Craft of Art: Originality and Industry in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque Workshop*, ed. by Andrew Ladis/Carolyn Wood, Athens, Ga./London 1995, pp. 113–133. See further Schumacher (note 2), pp. 56f., and, more recently, Leonard Barkan, *Michelangelo: A Life on Paper*, Princeton 2011, esp. pp. 185–188.

as creative disruptions brought about by the force of love; both are crafted as meaningful gifts for the beloved.<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps redundant to emphasize that the very practice of the lyrical genre relies upon the assumption that art making results from disruption, the production of the work acting as a forceful defense and antidote against the disturbing effects of passion. The creation of an amorous sonnet or a “testa divina” is thus an act of catharsis.

In the proem of his unfinished *Comento de’ miei sonetti* (1480–1490), Lorenzo de’ Medici contends: “if one diligently seeks the true definition of love, one would find that it can only be [defined as] an appetite for beauty [*appetito di bellezza*].”<sup>22</sup> Following in Plato’s footsteps, Lorenzo argues that love “is the means by which all things attain their perfection, ultimately reposing in the supreme beauty, which is God”. Consequently, “true love” presupposes “great perfection” in both the beloved and lover, although true love in its perfection is extremely rare.<sup>23</sup> In commenting on his *Occhi, io sospiro come vuole Amore*, Lorenzo expands on the relationship between love and beauty, which in his view is the source of both delight and despair. Because happiness “resides in fusing with the beauty longed for by love, thus dwelling with it inseparably”, it is obvious that, as long as that objective remains unattainable, love turns into “pain and unbearable

torment”, which are for the most part experienced in the heart.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, says Lorenzo, “the more beautiful is the thing the eyes see, the happier they are, and things appear to the eyes more beautiful the greater is love, that is, the desire of the heart”. Indeed, the appetite for beauty that manifests itself as love determines the intensity with which the eyes perceive beauty: “if love is great, it ensues that beauty will be or appear great to the eyes, otherwise it would not be love, that is, desire of beauty.”<sup>25</sup> Lorenzo elucidates the dialectics of the heart and the eyes as the conflict between two physiological functions: “the heart is the seat of the concupiscible appetite, where, namely, all the desires are engendered.” As sensory organs, the eyes “cannot distinguish the beauty of this or that thing”; therefore, “by eyes one necessarily means the operation of our soul, which operates through the eyes, as well as the contentment and pleasure that it feels by means of the eyes, when, relying on them, it judges the thing beautiful and, on this count, receives consolation and comfort”.<sup>26</sup> Lorenzo’s explanation of the mechanisms through which love feeds on beauty is ambivalent. In describing the perception of the beautiful woman through the lover’s eyes, he does not specify whether beauty is primarily an optical impression or a figment of the mind: “the eyes, however, not only see their object, that is, the eyes and beauty of

<sup>21</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 35–68 and 235–286 (for a study of Michelangelo’s own handwritten poems in Vat. Lat. 3211).

<sup>22</sup> “Perché, chi cerca diligentemente quale sia la vera diffinitione dello amore, trova non essere altro che appetito di bellezza” (Lorenzo de’ Medici, *Comento de’ miei sonetti*, ed. by Tiziano Zanato, Florence 1991, p. 137).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> “[...] lo amore desidera et è mosso da uno fine che si chiama felicità e beatitudine, la quale consiste nel congiungersi con quella bellezza che lo amore appetisce e con essa inseparabilmente stare; e insino a tanto che a questo fine di beatitudine non si perviene, amore non solamente non è bene, anzi è pena e tormento insopportabile, più e manco secondo la grandezza dello amore” (*ibidem*, p. 192).

<sup>25</sup> “Ma gli occhi, l’officio de’ quali è vedere, tanto sono più felici, quanto veggono cosa più bella, e ciascuna cosa tanto pare agli occhi più bella, quanto è maggiore lo amore, cioè il desiderio del cuore; perché se lo amore è grande, necessariamente conviene che la bellezza o sia o paia agli occhi grande,

altrimenti non sarebbe amore, cioè il desiderio della bellezza.” On Lorenzo’s sonnet “Occhi, io sospiro come vuole Amore” (see *ibidem*). See also Lorenzo de’ Medici, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Tiziano Zanato, Florence 1991, II, p. 496, no. lxxx.

<sup>26</sup> “Adunque si conclude per una medesima cagione gli occhi essere tanto più felici quanto il cuore è più misero: pigliando questi termini largamente, cioè il cuore come sede e luogo della concupiscibile, cioè nel quale nascono tutti e desideri, e gli occhi non in quanto sono senso, perché come senso proprio et exteriore non possono giudicare la bellezza d’una cosa o d’un’altra; e però bisogna per li occhi intendere l’operazione dell’anima nostra, che opera mediante gli occhi, e quel contento e piacere che sente per mezzo dello strumento degli occhi, quando per rapporto loro giudica una cosa bella e piglia per questo consolazione e conforto.” (Lorenzo de’ Medici [note 22], pp. 192f.). In conformity with Lorenzo, Michelangelo considers the eyes both a mental ‘organ’ and the source of amorous bliss: Buonarroti (note I), p. 89, no. 166 [348f.].

my lady, but also see the most beautiful and excellent thing they could ever see, for there is nothing that the heart could desire more than her, and its desire increases the beauty of my lady, who is the more beautiful and perfect the greater is the pain of the heart, that is, its desire for her.”<sup>27</sup> Despite its ambivalence, Lorenzo’s statement does make clear that the lover portrays the beloved as an image of perfect beauty. Whether real or imaginary, the image of the beloved is mostly a construct. As such, it lends itself to objectification; as a metaphoric object, the image of beauty can therefore be reproduced and shared with an audience.

In many of his poems, Michelangelo both blames and praises his eyes for their innate ability to single out, assess, and parcel beauty: “my eyes were created by my bright star to greatly distinguish beauty from beauty” (“po’ ch’a distinguer molto / dalla mie chiara stella / da bello a bel fur fatti gli occhi mei”).<sup>28</sup> As a divine gift, Michelangelo’s sense of beauty naturally requires him to discern celestial beauty in human beauty:

When the soul departed from God, Love  
 Made me keen-sighted, made you light  
 And glow; it is my misfortune that my great desire  
 Is forced to see him in whatever is mortal in you.  
 Just as heat cannot be separated from fire,  
 So too does eternal beauty inhere in every single  
 Thought of mine that extols whoever most  
 Resembles him, from whom it derives.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> “Ma gli occhi non solamente veggono l’obbietto loro, cioè gli occhi e la bellezza della donna mia, ma veggono la più bella et eccellente cosa che possino vedere, cioè la donna mia, perché nessuna cosa può tanto desiderare il cuore quanto lei; e dal desiderio suo nasce la maggiore bellezza della donna mia, la quale è tanto più bella e perfetta, quanto è maggiore la doglia del cuore, cioè il desiderio d’essa” (Lorenzo de’ Medici [note 22], p. 193).

<sup>28</sup> Buonarroti (note I), pp. 92f., no. 173 [356f.]. See further *ibidem*, p. 88, no. 164 [347f.].

<sup>29</sup> “Amor nel dipartir l’alma da Dio / me fe’ san occhio e te luc’e splendo-

In another sonnet, Michelangelo insists that attraction to beauty is necessarily conducive to divine contemplation:

If the soul was not created in God’s image  
 It would only long for outside beauty, which  
 Pleases the eyes; but because it is so fallacious  
 It soars upward toward the universal form.<sup>30</sup>

The expression “forma universale” connotes God not only as a metaphysical principle, but also as the matrix of any form, visual or conceptual, in conformity with beauty. Put otherwise, Michelangelo’s bliss and curse, his sharp discernment of beauty and vulnerability to love, is also what determines his excellence in creating forms:

If I was born neither deaf nor blind to that beautiful  
 Art in proportion to what burns and steals my heart,  
 This is the fault of what has destined me to fire.<sup>31</sup>

It is noteworthy that in the Italian text Michelangelo refers to the person “who [*chi*] burns and steals [his] heart” and “who [*chi*] has destined [him] to fire”. The ambiguity of the pronoun “chi” is most likely intentional, indicating that the source of love as desire for beauty is both the beloved (whether male or female) and God himself. In keeping with the lyrical tradition inaugurated by Petrarch and evolved by Lorenzo de’ Medici, Michelangelo designates love as an image of beauty:

re; / né può non rivederlo in quel che more / di te, per nostro mal, mie gran desio. / Come dal foco el caldo, esser diviso / non può dal bell’eterno ogni mie stima, / ch’exalta, ond’ella vien, chi più l’ somiglia” (*ibidem*, p. 18, no. 34 [186–188]).

<sup>30</sup> “E se creata a Dio non fusse eguale, / altro che l’ bel di fuor, c’agli occhi piace / più non vorria; ma perch’è sì fallace, / trascende nella forma universale” (*ibidem*, p. 60, no. 105 [285f.]).

<sup>31</sup> “S’i nacqui a quella né sordo né cieco, / porporzionato a chi l’ cor m’arde e fura, / colpa è di chi m’ha destinato al foco” (*ibidem*, p. 56, no. 97 [280f.]).

Love is a concept of beauty  
Imagined or seen in the heart.<sup>32</sup>

As expounded by Lorenzo, beauty originates in the woman. However, in imprinting the lover's heart through its sight, the image of the beautiful woman transfigures into divinity. In the soul, Michelangelo affirms, the woman

Becomes divine, honest, and beautiful  
For an immortal thing wants everything to be similar  
to itself.<sup>33</sup>

In a sense, the portrayal of love is never the portrait of the beloved. Because the image of the woman hints at the divinity from which it emanates – and with which it is likened by the lover's soul – it becomes the virtual representation of divine beauty. Michelangelo was sharply aware of this phenomenon:

Love, your beauty is not mortal, no face  
Among us can equal the image of the heart,  
Because you feed and burn us with quite  
Another fire and drive us with quite other wings.<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, because the perception of beauty is triggered by desire, thereby spawning “pain and torment”, the image of the greatest beauty is systematically accompanied by the greatest cruelty, either as the consequence of the beloved's adamancy in denying love, or because of her alleged unattainability, or, more generally, due to the incommensurability and insatiability of earthly desire (even when aimed at divinity). In other words, cruelty is an in-built component of any portrayal of love. Predictably, Mi-



—  
7 Piero di Cosimo,  
*Simonetta Vespucci*.  
Chantilly, Musée Condé

chelangelo discerns a strict correspondence between beauty and cruelty:

Nature was assuredly provident, for such great  
Cruelty does not deserve lesser beauty,  
So that the opposites mitigate one another.<sup>35</sup>

Paradoxically, excessive cruelty can only be mitigated through excessive beauty so that the mitiga-

<sup>32</sup> “Amore è un concetto di bellezza / immaginata o vista dentro al core, / amica di virtute e gentilezza” (*ibidem*, p. 20, no. 38 [189–191]).

<sup>33</sup> “Quiivi si fa divina, onesta e bella, / com’a sé simil vuol cosa immortale” (*ibidem*, p. 22, no. 42 [192–194]).

<sup>34</sup> “Amor, la tuo beltà non è mortale: / nessun volto fra noi è che pareg-

gi / l’immagine del cor, che ’nfihammi e reggi / con altro foco e muovi con altr’ale” (*ibidem*, p. 25, no. 49 [202]).

<sup>35</sup> “Ben provvide natura, né conviene / a tanta crudeltà minor bellezza, / ché l’un contrario l’altro ha temperato” (*ibidem*, p. 39, no. 69 [230–233]).

tion preordained by nature is ultimately founded on excess. And it is in fact the paroxysm of love as the syndrome of a naturally keen-sighted soul that Michelangelo wanted to convey through his depictions of beautiful women earmarked for his young beloved. These gifts qualify not only as portrayals of love, but also as sublimated representations of unreachable, cruelest love. It comes as little surprise that in order to express the highest beauty as the acutest epiphany of cruelty Michelangelo recovered and revamped the traditional format of the “*donna bella e crudele*” as configured in the art and poetry of late fifteenth-century Florence. It cannot be a coincidence that, in terms of iconography, one of the closest counterparts to Michelangelo’s *Ideal head*, *Zenobia*, and *Cleopatra* remains the so-called *Simonetta Vespucci* by Piero di Cosimo (Fig. 7).

Executed in the 1480s, Piero’s painting represents the bust-length image of a beautiful woman. Enfolded in an orange mantle decorated with green and red stripes, the woman’s bare breast is adorned only with a necklace of golden scales entwined with a curling asp, its thin tail arcing as it sticks out its tongue.<sup>36</sup> The litheness of the woman’s neck is enhanced by the purity of her slender nose in profile and by her majestic forehead, the hairline shaved in accordance with late fifteenth-century fashion. The eeriness of the woman’s necklace is rivaled by the complexity of her hair dress: a tangle of braids zigzagging above a barely visible cap punctuated by sizable pearls. On top of her head, a brooch equipped with wings and pearls serves as a

diadem: from it, laces of smaller pearls seem to hang, occasionally vanishing beneath the braided tresses.<sup>37</sup> Behind the head, a voluminous braid revolves, inexplicably applied to a transparent veil that rests atop most of the head dress, while two braids partially cover the nape of the sinuous neck. A winter landscape, made ominous by a cloudy sky, fills the background, bringing to the fore the woman’s snow-like bust. Despite the inscription (most probably a sixteenth-century addition) engraved on the parapet-like brown band below her bust, it is extremely unlikely that the woman depicted is Simonetta Vespucci, the beautiful Florentine noblewoman loved by Giuliano de’ Medici and commemorated by his brother, Lorenzo, in his *Canzoniere*. The living asp surrounding the figure’s breast suggested to Vasari that she was Cleopatra.<sup>38</sup> More to the point, her attributes designate her as a representation of lyrical beauty: a woman-snake, alluring and cruel, innocent and sensual.

It is not by chance that Piero turns the silver and gold filaments of the woman’s hair into the visual analogs of golden chains or entangled serpents. In describing the beauty of his lady, Petrarch notes:

You hide away your snare  
 Amid your blond and curly hair because  
 Nowhere my desire might get enmeshed;  
 With your hands, spread your locks in the wind  
 And bind me there, thus making me happy.  
 Let no one free me from the golden wire  
 Artfully careless, or braided high up,

<sup>36</sup> For a different interpretation of Piero di Cosimo’s so-called *Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci*, see Dennis Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange*, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 49–68. See also, more recently, Cristina Acidini, “Le metamorfosi della ‘Bella Simonetta’”, in: *Piero di Cosimo 1462–1522: pittore eccentrico fra Rinascimento e Maniera*, exh. cat., ed. by Elena Capretti et al., Florence 2015, pp. 77–89. See further Edward J. Olszewski, “Piero di Cosimo’s *Lady Fiammetta*”, in: *Source*, XXI (2002), 2, pp. 6–12, esp. p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> On late fifteenth-century hair dresses, see Rosita Levi Pisetzy, *Storia del costume in Italia*, II, Milan 1964, pp. 288–299, and the glossary in Jacqueline Herald, *Renaissance Dress in Italy 1400–1500*, London 1981, pp. 209–231.

<sup>38</sup> “[...] il quale Francesco [da Sangallo] ancora ha di mano di Piero (che non la debbo passare) una testa bellissima di Cleopatra con un aspido avvolto al collo” (Vasari [note 9], IV, p. 71). There is evidence that Francesco da Sangallo considered the painting in his possession to be a portrait of Simonetta Vespucci, and not a *Cleopatra* as pointed out by Vasari. On the verso of a drawing now in the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence (1670 A), one finds a short message addressed by Paolo Giovio to Francesco da Sangallo: “Maestro Francesco honorando: jo mandaj hier Sereno per la Simonetta, et non fusti in casa. Siate contento, se vi piace, di darla a questo messo, perchè non servirà ad altri che a me. Vostro el vescovo Jovio.” I thank Dario Donetti for providing me with this information.

Or from the burning spirit  
Of her sight, so sweet and sour.<sup>39</sup>

Undoubtedly, the sophistication and complexity of the hairdo displayed by Piero's beautiful woman evoke the wicked and ingenious machinery of laces and chains, baits and wires used for trapping and hunting. The lure of the beloved's golden braids is instrumental in the lover's entrapment and imprisonment. By the same token, Angelo Poliziano, in his *Stanze per la giostra* (1475–1478), describes a wild Giuliano de' Medici who, still untouched by love's power, inveighs against woman's beauty as a wellspring of peril and death:

Truth be told, a young woman almost looks  
Like a sharp rock under a beautiful sea,  
Or like a youthful snake among the flowers,  
Having just slid out of an old rock.  
Oh, the most afflicted of all the miserable  
Is the man who bears a woman's fierce pride!  
Because for all the beauty that fills her face  
As much deceit lurks in her insidious breast.<sup>40</sup>

As will be discussed below, the imagery of the "youthful snake" ("giovincl serpente") and the "old rock" ("vecchio scoglio") recurs in Michelangelo's *Rime*. Already in his *Canzoniere*, Petrarch had recalled that

This earthly life is like a meadow where  
The snake lies amidst grass and flowers:

<sup>39</sup> "E i tuoi lacci nascondi / fra i capei crespi e biondi / ché 'l mio volere  
altrove non s'invesca; / spargi co' le tue man le chiome al vento, / ivi mi  
lega, et puo' mi far contento. / Dal laccio d'or non sia mai chi me scioglia, /  
negletto ad arte, e 'n nanellato et irto, / né de l'ardente spirto / de la sua vista  
dolcemente acerba" (Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Marco Santagata,  
Milan 2004, p. 1095, no. 270, and p. 1103 [56–64]).

<sup>40</sup> "Giovane donna sembra veramente / quasi sotto un bel mare acuto scoglio,  
/ o ver tra ' fiori un giovincl serpente / uscito pur mo' fuor del vecchio  
scoglio. / Ahi, quanto è fra ' più miseri dolente / chi può soffrir di donna il fero  
orgoglio! / Ché quanto ha il volto più di biltà pieno, / più cela inganni nel fallace  
seno" (Angelo Poliziano, *Stances / Stanze et Fable d'Orphée / Fabula di Orfeo: édition  
bilingue*, ed. by Francesco Bausi, transl. by Émilie Séris, Paris 2006, p. 6 [15]).

If any of its sights is agreeable to the eyes  
It is only to more greatly ensnare the soul.<sup>41</sup>

However, poetry can conquer the perfidious heart  
of the beautiful woman:

There is nothing in the world that verses cannot obtain:  
Through their scores, they manage to charm asps  
And even to adorn frost with new flowers.<sup>42</sup>

For Michelangelo, instead, the cruelty and sourness of the beautiful woman can at times be mitigated by experience, over the course of time:

If you do not steer from reason, I hope  
You will make me happy; for snakes  
Lose their bite by serving well, just as  
Sourness when it sets your teeth on edge.<sup>43</sup>

Reputed to be the king of serpents and described by Pliny as a small snake,<sup>44</sup> the mythical basilisk also plays an important role in the Italian lyrical tradition. In describing the power of a woman's eyes, Lorenzo de' Medici fears:

Our basilisk would turn us into stone or  
Otherwise our soul should breathe its last.<sup>45</sup>

Whether a snake, a basilisk, or Medusa, beauty seduces and unsettles, threatens and even kills. In Piero's

<sup>41</sup> "Questa vita terrena è quasi un prato, / che 'l serpente tra ' fiori et l'erba  
giace; / et s'alcuna sua vista agli occhi piace, / è per lassar più l'animo invescato" (Petrarca [note 39], p. 471, no. 99, and p. 472 [5f.]).

<sup>42</sup> "Nulla al mondo è che non possano i versi: / et li aspidi incantar sanno  
in lor note, / nonché il gelo adornar di novi fiori" (*ibidem*, p. 986, no. 239,  
and pp. 989f. [28–30]).

<sup>43</sup> "E se dalla ragion tu non ti parti, / spero c'un dì tu mi fara' contento: /  
ché 'l morso il ben servir toglì a' serpenti, / come l'agresto quand'allega i  
denti" (Buonarroti [note I], p. 27, no. 54 [206–211]).

<sup>44</sup> Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, VIII, 33, 78.

<sup>45</sup> "Il nostro bavalischio o faria priete / di noi, o converria l'alma expiras-  
si!" (Lorenzo de' Medici [note 25], II, p. 525, no. cvi.)



8 Sandro Botticelli, *Springtime (Primavera)*, detail. Florence, Uffizi, Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture



9 Sandro Botticelli, *Springtime (Primavera)*, detail. Florence, Uffizi, Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture

painting, the asp twirling around the woman's necklace is a (perhaps futile) warning: the white surface of the breast is an alabaster "meadow" where "a serpent lies"; fixing one's gaze upon the beautiful woman is not without consequences, for the asp will hiss and release its venom, petrifying the beholder, whose eyes might have already become entrapped within the tangle of her golden braids. It is no coincidence that the woman's snake-like braids are as potentially ominous as Medusa's fearful locks of snakes. They are perhaps even more dangerous, for their beauty hides away woman's snare. Guarded by scales, the bonnet worn by the woman in Michelangelo's *Ideal head* (Fig. I) also declares the reptilian nature of beauty; this detail equally suggests that, in order to probe the metaphorical depth of the "teste divine", it is imperative to focus on the estranging adornments of female dress.

In Michelangelo's verses, woman's ornaments are the nemesis of the unfortunate lover: in constant contact with the woman, they enjoy an intimacy with her body that men are usually denied. In one of his earliest sonnets, Michelangelo writes:

How joyful is the garland on her golden locks,  
 So happy and well fashioned out of flowers  
 Each one of which thrusts forward past the others  
 That it might be the first to kiss her head.  
 Throughout the day, that dress is gratified  
 Which locks her breast and then seems to widen,  
 And what they call a spun-gold thread  
 Never ceases to touch her cheeks and neck.  
 But even more delighted seems that ribbon  
 Gilded at the tips, with such blendings that  
 It presses and touches the breast it fastens,



10 Sandro Botticelli,  
*Venus and Mars*, detail.  
London, National Gallery



11 Sandro Botticelli,  
*Portrait of a lady*.  
Frankfurt, Städel Museum

And her simple belt, tied up in a knot  
Seems to say to itself: 'here would I clasp  
Forever!' What, then, would my arms do?<sup>46</sup>

Michelangelo's sonnet gives the visual impression of representing one of the nymphs, deities, or beautiful women immortalized in the paintings of Sandro Botticelli. The Flora of *Springtime* (circa 1482), for example, wears a garland of flowers that, if set in motion, might well appear to kiss the woman's forehead; locks of "spun-gold thread[s]" border her oblong face, un-

<sup>46</sup> "Quanto si gode, lieta e ben contesta / di fior sopra ' crin d'or d'una grillanda, / che l'altro inanzi l'uno all'altro manda, / com'ei ch'il primo sia a baciare la testa! / Contenta è tutto il giorno quella vesta / che serra 'l petto e poi par che si spanda, / e quel c'oro filato si domanda / le guanci' e 'l collo di toccar non resta. / Ma più lieto quel nastro par che goda, / dorato in punta,

ceasingly grazing her cheeks and neck (Fig. 8). Next to Flora, Venus sports a transparent silk gown, which "locks her breast" and "widens" as it falls (Fig. 9).<sup>47</sup> Despite the humbleness of her dress, the servant in Botticelli's *Judith Returning to Betulia* (1472/73, Florence, Uffizi) carries a "simple belt, tied up in a knot" below the breast. More importantly, the "ribbon" ("quel nastro") extolled by Michelangelo in his sonnet most likely corresponds to the strip of false-hair braids that sometimes encircles the chest of Botticelli's female figures like a second cleavage by ending up

con si fatte tempore / che preme e tocca il petto ch'egli allaccia. / E la schietta cintura che s'annoda / mi par dir seco: qui vo' stringer sempre. / Or che farebbon dunche le mie braccia?" (Buonarroti [note 1], p. 4, no. 4 [157f.]); for the English translation, see Saslow (note 7), p. 69 (I modified verses 10f).

<sup>47</sup> In this regard, see Dempsey (note 5), pp. 67–72.

affixed at the center of the breast (sometimes by dint of a brooch). Examples of this *nastro* can be discerned in *Venus and Mars* (1483; Fig. 10) and, most conspicuously, in the so-called *Portrait of a lady*, now in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt (Fig. 11): an image iconographically related to Michelangelo's *Ideal head*. In both paintings, the *nastro*, comprised of "such blendings" ("sì fatte tempore") – that is, of harmoniously blended hair – "presses and touches the breast it fastens".<sup>48</sup>

Michelangelo most probably composed this sonnet around 1507, when he was residing in Bologna, and the female adornments that he admires and celebrates in it were assuredly outdated by that time. Thus the sonnet takes on the form of a fantasy from Michelangelo's youth, and his animation of the garland, locks, gown, ribbon, and belt seems mediated through a network of recollections that are both literary and visual. By fetishizing the objects worn by the beautiful woman, Michelangelo draws partly upon tradition, but he also introduces an intensity and radicalization that will plainly surface only in later poems. In these compositions, his evocation of garments will voice his desire for self-annihilation, his wish to turn his skin into clothing hewing to his beloved's skin, as expressed in a sonnet most probably written for Cavalieri (circa 1535):

Merciful to others and merciless only to itself  
 The vile worm rises, and with torment and pain  
 Dresses the hand of others, shedding its cocoon:  
 Born just and only for death, as can be said.  
 May it be my fate to dress my lord's live  
 Flesh with my dead flesh, for just as a snake  
 Sloughs off its scales against the rock,

<sup>48</sup> "Con sì fatte tempore" is unanimously construed as "in such a manner", which is also a correct translation, *tempore* also meaning 'ways'.

<sup>49</sup> "D'altrui pietoso e sol di sé spietato / nasce un vil brutto, che con pena e doglia / l'altrui man veste e la suo scorza spoglia / e sol per morte si può dir ben nato. / Così volesse al mie signor mie fato / vestir suo viva di mie morta spoglia, / che, come serpe al sasso si discoglia, / pur per morte potria cangiar

So too death might at least change my state.  
 If only was mine the furry pelt that,  
 Interwoven with her hair, forms such a dress  
 That happily embraces such a beautiful breast!  
 Then, I would own her through the day; or the plates  
 That serve as the base and column of her breast!  
 For, then, I would at least carry two snowy orbs!<sup>49</sup>

Evidently, the beloved of Michelangelo's sonnet switches gender between the second quatrain and the concluding tercets. Initially referred to as a "lord", "mie signore" is subsequently reimagined as a woman, although the Italian text preserves a much higher degree of ambiguity in the definition of the beloved's gender. More stunningly, the metaphors through which the garments and the body underneath are described are so obscurely interconnected that a distracted reader, in perusing the poem, could easily remain confused by the parade of disparate similes conjured up by Michelangelo. Unequivocally, the "vile animal" ("vil brutto"; translated here as "vile worm" for reasons of clarity) that lives for death is a silkworm (*bruco*). Almost homophonic, *bruco* and *bruto* are not perfectly interchangeable; with *bruto*, Michelangelo opted for a term that designates both animals and human beings, thus humanizing the silkworm and its allegedly altruistic mission. From the outset, then, Michelangelo projects himself into the figure of the worm: an unselfconscious, irrational animal that would prove completely insignificant were it not for its ability to spin a cocoon of raw silk. Contrary to what Michelangelo suggests, in reality the worm does not necessarily die upon leaving its cocoon: it is usually killed beforehand in order to secure the quality of silk.<sup>50</sup> Michelangelo's

mie stato. / O fussi sol la mia l'irsuta pelle / che, del suo pel contesta, fa tal gonna / che con ventura stringe sì bel seno, / ch'i' l'are' pure il giorno; o le pianelle / che fanno a quel di loro basa e colonna, / ch'i' pur ne porterei duo nevi almeno" (Buonarroti [note I], p. 55, no. 94 [277f.]).

<sup>50</sup> See Flavio Crippa, "Dal baco al filo", in: *La seta in Italia dal Medioevo al Seicento: dal baco al drappo*, ed. by Luca Molà et al., Venice 2000, pp. 3–33.

mischaracterization of the worm can therefore be justified only in light of the primary image he intends to develop in the quatrain: his metaphorical self-transformation into a ‘skin’ of silk that perfectly fits his beloved’s hand in the form of a glove. Not surprisingly, Michelangelo also wishes to morph into a snake, which sheds its skin after tenaciously rubbing its body against a rock. Once again, the simile is flawed. Snakes do not die after losing their skin: they ‘rejuvenate’. On this score, however, they may symbolize the resurrection of the soul. In an incomplete sestina (circa 1524–1529), Michelangelo expresses a similar astonishing desire:

Like an old serpent through a narrow space  
 May I pass, shedding my old armor,  
 And may my soul, stripped of its old habit  
 And of everything human, be restored to life,  
 Covering itself with a more trusty shield:  
 Faced with death, the whole world is less than nothing.<sup>51</sup>

In his contempt for his own bodily persona, Michelangelo assimilates himself to a dismissible envelop: a flap of removed skin, as the one wielded by the victorious Saint Bartholomew in his *Last Judgment*, which scholars have construed (rightly in my opinion) as a self-portrait of the master.<sup>52</sup> It is impossible here to explore the manifold implications of this. On the other hand, I will be able later to say more about the opposition between ‘armed’ and ‘nude’ proposed by Michelangelo in the sestina. For now, it is important to stress that by discarding its old scales (“vecchie arme”) in passing between two rocks (“istretto loco”), the snake allows its nudity to be shielded by a new armor: a metaphor for the soul protected by divine love from temptation (characterized by Michelangelo in the pre-

ceding verses of this sestina as the “wicked habit” that deprives him of divine grace). Returning to the sonnet, it is not accidental that the imagery of the serpent finds its place in a sonnet entirely consecrated to Michelangelo’s desire to become an integral part of the beloved’s attire: a second skin worn tight to, and coalescing with, the man’s/woman’s body. On a deeper level, the snake is an analog of Michelangelo’s desire: the loss of the scales is tantamount to a “change of state”, to sublimation. But is this spiritual sublimation? Does it entail the transcendence of carnal desire? By stripping its skin with the aid of an “old rock” (“vecchio scoglio”), the serpent, according to Poliziano, recovers its youth (“giovincel serpente”)—that is, its ability to seduce and newly inject its petrifying poison. Does Michelangelo also wish to become a rejuvenated snake, an object of fatal seduction? Of course not: at least, not consciously. But his self-assimilation with the snake, if considered within the context of the Florentine lyrical tradition, is imbued with latent contradictions: for him, the serpent is both desire and annihilation of desire; it acts as the embodiment of purified passion only after (temporarily) shedding its scaly skin.

In a sense, the contents of Michelangelo’s tercets constitute a regression into a lyrical imagery that had inspired him years earlier. The “furry pelt [...] interwoven with her hair” (“l’irsuta pelle [...] del suo pel contesta”) is no doubt identical with the “ribbon gilded at the tips, with such blendings” (“quel nastro [...] dorato in punta, con sì fatte tempre”) evoked in the early sonnet quoted above. Now, however, the adornment reveals itself in its rudimentary physiology: it is *pelle* (both ‘pelt’ and ‘skin’) of *pelo* (‘hair’) and, if the alliteration of the two terms was not enough, Michelangelo specifies that it is ‘hairy’ (“irsuta”) like a beard. Through its metaphorical evocation, this rib-

<sup>51</sup> “Qual vecchio serpe per istretto loco / passar poss’io, lasciando le vecchie arme, / e dal costume rinnovata e tolta / sie l’alma in vita e d’ogni umana cosa, / coprendo sé con più sicuro scudo, / ché tutto el mondo a

morte è men che nulla” (Buonarrotti [note I], p. 17, no. 33 [184–186]); for the English translation, see Saslow (note 7), p. 112.

<sup>52</sup> See in this regard Bernadine Ann Barnes, “Skin, Bones and Dust:

bon of false braids is already presented as an organic extension of the body: one that is moreover perceived as animated, indeed lucky enough (“con ventura”) to “embrace” the woman’s breast. Perhaps more difficult is the interpretation of “pianelle” (translated here as “plates”). The term has puzzled many a scholar, since *pianelle* are usually ‘slippers’ in early modern Tuscan vernacular.<sup>53</sup> Of course, slippers do not serve as the “base and column” of a breast (“quel” in the sonnet certainly refers to “seno”). The term *pianella*, however, also refers to a cap or helmet covering the head.<sup>54</sup> Needless to say, neither caps nor helmets hold and support the breast. But what if, metaphorically, Michelangelo intends “pianelle” (“caps”) as the two cups that buttress the breast as a part of a cuirass? Although there are no immediately apparent extant examples of such an item, one can perhaps imagine these “pianelle” as the metallic concave plates (or cups) that hold the breast of *Dovizia*, a glazed terracotta statuette by Giovanni della Robbia (Fig. 12) that scholars have interpreted as a (slightly modified) reproduction of Donatello’s now destroyed homonymous sculpture for the Mercato Vecchio, Florence.<sup>55</sup> In his *Seated woman* (Fig. 13) executed around the same time as the “teste divine” for Cavalieri, Michelangelo sketched in red chalk the face, neck, and sections of the garment of a warrior woman, completing the half-figure in pen and brown ink.<sup>56</sup> On her breast, the woman displays what might be the breast plate of a cuirass, made up of three or five parts: two breast ‘cups’ that may or may not be independent of two broad straps affixed to the

shoulders; and a vertical plate undergirding the cups. Whether metallic or not, this fantastically re-assembled breast plate is somewhat analogous to that worn by Donatello’s famous *Judith* (Fig. 14). More specifically, Judith’s cuirass consists of a plate adhering to her upper chest with, at the center, an extension pointed downward cleavage-like, as well as two spauldrels; the metallic plate meaningfully contrasts with the soft *gonna* revealing through its folds Judith’s blossoming breast (with its outjutting nipples), whose relief is in turn enhanced by a “simple belt, tied up in a knot” (to paraphrase Michelangelo). As will be discussed shortly, the adaptation of armor (for instance, helmets and cuirasses) into ornamental props worn by the “*donna bella e crudele*” is not uncommon in late fifteenth-century lyrical imagery. If one accepts this meaning of “pianelle”, then it is evident that the “due nevi” (literally, “two snows”) that they support are the two snow-white breasts of the beautiful woman.

A closer inspection of one of Michelangelo’s “divine heads”, the so-called *Zenobia* (Fig. 3), reveals an interesting parallel in this regard. Provided with a raised collar, a sort of vest laterally encloses the woman’s chest, opening enough to reveal her luscious bare breast: two soft orbs of flesh. A strip linking the two sides of the vest curiously lines the upper part of the chest, atop the “due nevi”. Immediately below the chest, a band, perhaps of fabric, serves as a support, enhancing the impression of tactile softness with which the breast is ‘divinely’ infused. Even if the delicately sketched band below the chest is not a *pianella*, the example of *Zenobia*

Self-Portraits in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement*”, in: *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXXV (2004), pp. 969–986. See further Rosand (note 9), pp. 214f.

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of the term, see Herman Grimm, review of “Le Rime di Michelangelo Buonarroti [...] cavate dagli autografi e pubblicate da Cesare Guasti”, in: *Über Künstler und Kunstwerke*, I (1865), pp. 97–113; *idem*, “Nachträge zum Leben Michelangelos”, in: *Über Künstler und Kunstwerke*, II (1867), pp. 41–56, 97–113; Cesare Guasti, “Di alcune critiche tedesche sulla nuova edizione critica delle *Rime* di M.A. Buonarroti P.S.E.A. fatta sugli autografi”, in: *Il Buonarroti*, III (1868), pp. 3–22; *Die Dichtungen des Michelagnoli Buonarroti*, ed. by Karl Frey, Berlin 1897, p. 55, no. lxvi, and p. 346; Buonarroti (note 1), p. 277; and Saslow (note 7), p. 94: “or the slippers / that make

themselves as base and support for him / so I might carry him for at least two snows”.

<sup>54</sup> See Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, XIII, Turin 1986, p. 268, s.v. *pianella*.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of this piece and its relation to Donatello’s sculpture, see Adrian W.B. Randolph, *Engaging Symbols: Gender, Politics, and Public Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, New Haven/London 2002, esp. pp. 35–41.

<sup>56</sup> See Wilde (note 2), pp. 77f, no. 41; Hartt (note 2), p. 260, no. 366; de Tolnay (note 2), II, p. 97, no. 320; Gere (note 2), p. 72, no. 14; Chapman (note 2), pp. 201f.; and Schumacher (note 2), pp. 144f. (as by Antonio Mini).



12 Giovanni della Robbia, *Abundance (Dovizia)*, detail. Minneapolis Institute of Arts



13 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Seated woman*. London, British Museum, inv. 1859,0625.547 r



14 Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*, detail. Florence, Palazzo Vecchio



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15 School of Andrea del Verrocchio, *Woman in profile*. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

suitably renders the idea of the sensuous intimacy between garment and breast described by Michelangelo in the coda of his sonnet. Like *Ideal head* (Fig. 1), *Zenobia* brings to mind Piero di Cosimo's so-called *Simonetta Vespucci* (Fig. 7). The curtain-like device that Michelangelo engineered to showcase the breast in *Zenobia* can be interpreted as a much more advanced version of Piero's enfolding mantle. In a similar manner, the woman carved on a bas-relief attributed to the school of Andrea del Verrocchio in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Fig. 15) exhibits her plump breasts

<sup>57</sup> See John Pope-Hennessy, *Catalogue of the Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London 1964, pp. 168f., no. 42.

enfolded within a gaping mantel.<sup>57</sup> Two drawings from the Lord Rosebery Album ascribed to Marco Zoppo and dated to circa 1465 (Figs. 16, 17) confirm that such depictions of beautiful women are not confined to the Florentine tradition. In the first of these drawings, the woman, turned in profile and crowned by a winged helmet, has her breast sensually deployed through the support of a knotted 'shawl'; the same device appears in the second drawing, where the woman sports a diadem-coif shaped like an ionic volute.<sup>58</sup> Analogously, in *Zenobia* the crested helmet affixed to a curly hair bristling with small braids alludes to another aspect of the beautiful woman: her warrior nature.

The representation of the beloved as a warrior is a substantial motif in Michelangelo's lyrical output, but a detailed consideration of its significance first requires some additional observations about Michelangelo's treatment of the woman-snake imagery. In this respect, the so-called *Cleopatra* (Fig. 6) – one of the "divine heads" donated by Michelangelo to his adored Cavalieri – is the quintessential example. Everything in this magnificent sheet is consumed in torsion. The woman's flexuous neck twirls in opposition to the rotating shoulder and torso. Tilted downward, the twisting head stretches to its anatomical limits the possibilities of bodily motion. Gathered on a braided coil crowned with loose locks, the hair is clenched by a kind of cushion pressed against the top of the temples by a decorated metallic strip, not dissimilar to the one displayed in the head dress of the woman in *Ideal head* (Fig. 1). Akin to a headband, the strip – in conjunction with the cushion – resembles the remnant of a disassembled helmet. Also, this 'minimalist' headgear reminds us of narrow volutes symmetrically bracketing the face. Lightly sketched, a filet spans across the woman's forehead. Opening wide her eyes, the woman looks away from the beholder, who no doubt would be unable to endure the intense glare of this human basilisk.

<sup>58</sup> See Hugo Chapman, *Padua in the 1450s: Marco Zoppo and His Contemporaries*, exh. cat., London 1998, pp. 34–40.



16 Marco Zoppo (attributed to),  
*A female warrior.*  
 London, British Museum,  
 inv. 1920,0214.1.11 v



17 Marco Zoppo (attributed to),  
*A female warrior turned to the  
 right.* London, British Museum,  
 inv. 1920,0214.1.8 v

It is undeniable that the most spellbinding element of Michelangelo's drawing is the robust serpent that curls around the woman's shoulder and loops insidiously around her breast, caressing the frontal nipple with the side of its head. Hovering in the back, the snake's tail seems to culminate in a second head. Intersecting with the serpent at an almost right angle, a massive braid comes to rest after circumnavigating the woman's neck. Side by side, the braid and the serpent show their clear mutual connection. They are both metaphors: of the reptilian nature of beauty; of the dangers of passion; of carnal desire. The braid, however, is in itself a metaphorical snake: it is part of the woman, whereas the serpent is not. Slithering

its scales on her skin, the snake not only clothes the woman, but encircles, embraces, and attaches itself to her. With Michelangelo's sonnets in mind, it is fair to discern in the serpent an incarnation of his own desire for the "donna bella e crudele". He indeed explicitly wishes to clothe, to encircle, to embrace, to fuse with the beloved's flesh like a second skin. In *Cleopatra*, the snake has not yet lost its scales; it has not been purified or sublimated through divine fulguration. Here, Michelangelo's own passion portrays itself unfiltered: 'his' snake shares the reptilian complexion of beauty, for in the end, desire and beauty are the products of desire itself. Desire magnifies beauty; desire grows with beauty through desire.

In Michelangelo's view, desire depicts the portrait of the beloved through the most perfect beauty. In her entwining movement, the woman portrayed in *Cleopatra* is not surprisingly the quintessence of the *figura serpentinata*.<sup>59</sup> Spiraling from bottom to top or vice versa, the bust of the woman obeys the nature of both a snake and fire, and the coil of revolving braids above her head serves as a vessel for her flaming locks. Scrutinizing the drawing, one is tempted to see truth in Giovan Paolo Lomazzo's contention that for Michelangelo the apex of beauty consisted in the "serpentine figure".<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the nexus of love, beauty, and art characteristic of Michelangelo's lyrical inspiration can be said to crystallize in the image and imagery of the serpent. As a gift for Cavalieri, *Cleopatra* is perhaps the most dramatic representation of carnality: a condition that Michelangelo abhorred, and one that he tended to repudiate as the downside of the sense of beauty with which he had been divinely endowed at his birth.

And yet, Michelangelo very often describes as unviable the self-annihilation longed for as a necessary step toward emancipating himself from carnality. The image of earthly love always interferes with that of divine love, filling Michelangelo with perpetual distress. At the end of one of his madrigals, Michelangelo voices his desire to return to God, "where only beauty is, outside the fierce woman", but

The real image  
That makes me alive then returns to my heart  
Lest love be won by death.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> A similar observation is made by Andreas Prater, *Michelangelos Medici-Kapelle: "Ordine composto" als Gestaltungsprinzip von Architektur und Ornament*, Waldsassen 1979, p. 110.

<sup>60</sup> See Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle arti*, ed. by Roberto Paolo Ciardi, Florence 1975, II, pp. 29f.

<sup>61</sup> "Così l'alma impedita / del mio morir, che sol poria giovarne, / più volte per andarne / s'è mossa là dov'esser sempre spera, / dov'è beltà sol fuor di donna altiera; / ma l'immagine vera, / della qual vivo, allor risorge al core / perché da morte non sia vinto amore" (Buonarroti [note I], p. 63, no. 112 [295f.])

Especially in his passion for Cavalieri, Michelangelo repeatedly despaired of finding liberation in death:

Why should I keep venting this intense  
Desire with tears or sorrowful words,  
If Heaven, which entrusts fate with our soul,  
Either late or not even briefly frees us from it?  
Why does my heart keep pushing me to grieve,  
If everyone must die? To these eyes, then,  
The final hour should come less arduous  
For any blessing will not outweigh my pains.  
Still, if I cannot dodge the blows I take  
And snatch, at least, if they are fated,  
Who will intervene between my joy and hurt?  
If, won and captured, I am doomed to bliss  
It is no wonder that, naked and lonely,  
I remain the captive of a knight in armor.<sup>62</sup>

In the first of his *Due Lezioni* (1546), Benedetto Varchi identifies Cavalieri as the addressee of Michelangelo's sonnet.<sup>63</sup> From that point onward, the "knight in armor" ("*cavalier armato*") in the coda has been rightly interpreted as an allusion to Michelangelo's young friend (*Cavalieri*). What is perhaps less evident is that, despite the pithy wordplay devised by Michelangelo to disclose the identity of his beloved, the assimilation of Cavalieri with the "donna crudele" of the lyrical tradition entails an extraordinary conceptual reversal.

In his sonnet to Cavalieri, Michelangelo breaks the mold by endowing a lyrical convention with the nominal traits of the loved man: Cavalieri is much

<sup>62</sup> "A che più debb'i' omai l'intensa voglia / sfogar con pianti o con parole meste, / se di tal sorte 'l ciel, che l'alma veste, / tard'o per tempo alcun mai non ne spoglia? / A che 'l cor lass'a più languir m'invoglia, / s'altri pur dee morir? Dunque per queste / luci l'ore del fin fian men moleste; / c'ogni altro ben val men c'ogni mia doglia. / Però se 'l colpo ch'io ne rub' e 'nvolò / schifar non posso, almen, s'è destinato / chi entrerà 'n fra la dolcezza e 'l duolo? / Se vint' e preso i' debb'esser beato, / meraviglia non è se nudo e solo / resto prigion d'un cavalier armato" (*ibidem*, pp. 56f., no. 98 [281]).

<sup>63</sup> Benedetto Varchi, *Due Lezioni di M[esser] Benedetto Varchi*, Florence 1549, p. 47.

more than a knight of love; he is the personified ideal of the “*donna bella e crudele*”. Arguably, Cavalieri’s very name makes him a personification in the flesh of chivalrous, cruel love. A “knight in armor”, he inflicts bliss and pain like the cruel woman of the lyrical imagery; through his beauty, a promise of perennial bliss, he captures and imprisons his lover, who is “naked and lonely” – that is, devoid of any arms or shield to protect himself. The lover’s metaphorical nudity is certainly specific to Michelangelo’s lyrical imagery. In the sestina quoted earlier, Michelangelo wishes to shed his skin like a serpent and, once stripped bare of the scales, to be enveloped within God’s “trusty shield”. In the madrigal above, instead, Michelangelo renounces the protection of divine love and offers himself naked to his blissful, carnal torture: utterly vulnerable to love’s onslaught.

The conceptual reversal implemented by Michelangelo in his verses goes even farther. As a young man, Michelangelo must have heard of the sumptuous tournaments organized in Florence by both Lorenzo (in 1469) and Giuliano de’ Medici (in 1475) in order to, among other things, celebrate the beauty of their respective beloveds: Lucrezia Donati and Simonetta Vespucci. In the course of these jousts, Lorenzo and Giuliano had battled to defeat an army of famous *cavalieri*, that is, knights issued from the Florentine and Italian nobility. In the 1469 tournament, Lorenzo was awarded a helmet worked in silver with Mars for a crest.<sup>64</sup> In his *Stanze per la giostra*, Poliziano describes a belligerent Giuliano, “his cuirass boiling with fire, his shield flashing with the rays of the sun”.<sup>65</sup> On these occasions, first Lorenzo and then Giuliano dressed like knights of a Florentine neo-chivalric saga, each carrying a banner with an allegorical representation of

their beloved. To fully understand the lyrical implications of the Medici jousts, it is relevant to dwell upon a few verses from Poliziano’s *Stanze*.<sup>66</sup> At the end of the poem, the hero, Giulio (the counterpart of Giuliano) has a vision in his dream:

It seemed to him to see his fierce woman,  
Her face replete with hardness and pride,  
Tying Cupid to the green column  
Of Pallas’s prosperous plant,  
Her white gown covered with arms,  
Shielding her chaste breast with the Gorgon,  
Plucking the feathers of Cupid’s wings, and  
Breaking the bow and darts of the poor child.<sup>67</sup>

In the tournament of 1475, Giuliano sported a helmet bearing a representation of Love tied to an olive branch, this detail standing in for both the goddess Pallas and Giuliano’s personal emblem.<sup>68</sup> In addition, Giuliano carried a shield ornamented with the head of Medusa, the Gorgon. In other words, the “*donna bella e crudele*” of Poliziano’s *Stanze* is proleptically supplied with, or has appropriated, Giuliano’s shield, subduing with it the very Cupid whose liberation was considered to inspire Giuliano’s feat, as suggested by the image on his helmet. In Poliziano’s poem, the vision of the dream thus provides a symbolic motive for Giuliano’s combat. An alter ego of Simonetta Vespucci, the “fierce woman” is both a nymph and a warrior; paradoxically, her weapons against Love are exactly those that arm the goddess to whom Giuliano was committed: Pallas. In the *Stanze*, Poliziano keenly exploits the duality of Pallas as a paragon of chastity and valor. In fact, it is valor that emboldens Giulio to recover Pallas’s armor in order to foil the woman’s assault (in order, that is, to as-

<sup>64</sup> See Dempsey (note 5), p. 80.

<sup>65</sup> Angelo Poliziano: *Sylva in scabiam*, ed. by Paolo Orvieto, Rome 1989, p. 94 [250–255], and Dempsey (note 5), p. 82.

<sup>66</sup> For the meaning of Poliziano’s celebration of Giuliano de’ Medici, see Randolph (note 55), pp. 196–241.

<sup>67</sup> “Pargli veder feroce la sua donna, / tutta nel volto rigida e proterva, /

legar Cupido alla verde colonna / della felice pianta di Minerva, / armata sopra alla candida gonna, / che ’l casto petto col Gorgon conserva; / e par che tutte gli spennecchi l’ali, / e che rompa al meschin l’arco e li strali” (Poliziano [note 40], p. 55 [28]).

<sup>68</sup> See Salvatore Settis, “*Citarea* ‘su una impresa di bronconi’”, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXXIV (1971), pp. 135–177.



18 French manufacture (?) after Sandro Botticelli and workshop, *Minerva pacifica*, fragment of a tapestry. Private collection

suage her hardness). In the dream, Cupid cries out for help, but Giulio seems initially unable to rescue him:

In his deceitful dream, filled with  
Confusion, Giulio seemed to reply:  
'My sweet lord, how can I do that?  
Pallas's armor shields her entirely;  
See, my spirit cannot endure  
The tremendous look of Medusa,  
The furious hissing of her horned snakes,  
Her face, her helmet, her thundering spear!<sup>69</sup>

By way of encouragement, Cupid prompts Giulio to lift his eyes and to fix them upon Glory: she will drive away fear, enabling him “to divest his woman of Pallas’s armor / leaving her bare in her white gown”.<sup>70</sup> With Glory’s inspiration, Giulio will rid himself of the horrifying vision of the woman “who steals [him] from [him]self”, paralyzing him with the aid of “Medusa’s horrendous face”.<sup>71</sup> In Poliziano’s *Stanze*, Giulio accepts the challenge, exhorting Love to join him in his duel against the “*donna crudele*”:

If I am, sweet Love, if at least I am worthy  
Of being your companion against that woman,  
Against her who (if the dream tells the truth)  
Binds you with her strength and ingenuity,  
Then, infuse my mind with your fury, thus  
Stirring a sense of mercy in her heart;  
But my virtue in and of itself does not go far,  
Because her valor is too strong.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> “E Iulio a lui dentro al fallace sonno / pareo risponder con mente confusa: / ‘come poss’io ciò far, dolce mio donno, / ché nell’armi di Palla è tutta chiusa? / Vedi i mie spiriti che soffrir non ponno / la terribil sembianza di Medusa, / e ’l rabbioso fischiar delle ceraste, / e ’l volto e l’elmo e ’l folgorar dell’aste” (Poliziano [note 40], p. 53 [30]).

<sup>70</sup> “Costei pareo ch’ad acquistar vittoria / rapissi Iulio orribilmente in campo, / e che l’arme di Palla alla sua donna / spogliassi, e lei lasciassi in bianca gonna” (*ibidem*, p. 54 [32]).

<sup>71</sup> “S’io vidi drento alle tue armi chiusa / la sembianza di lei che me a me fura; / s’io vidi il volto orribil di Medusa / far lei contro ad Amor troppo esser dura” (*ibidem*, p. 57 [42]).

<sup>72</sup> “E s’io son, dolce Amor, s’io son pur degno / essere il tuo campion

Poliziano's *Stanze* concludes with an enthused Giulio entering the arena. For a savvy contemporary reader, it was evident that while Giulio/Giuliano would win the combat/tournament in the name of love, the "woman" could never belong to him: Simonetta was married and her chastity was non-negotiable. In the *Stanze*, the "donna bella e crudele", the nymph, once despoiled of Pallas's armor, vanishes within a "bleak cloud" and is "cruelly sequestered" from Giulio's eyes. By recovering Pallas's armor, Giuliano turns into a champion of valor, but his valor (*virtù*) in and of itself is useless against the virtue (*valore*) of his beloved. Implicit in the woman's virtue is the notion of chastity, her mightiest defense against love's attacks. Poliziano's *Stanze* therefore incorporates and exposes the ideological apparatus that justified the tournament of a Medici knight in honor of a married woman. Within that ideological context, the image of the "donna bella e crudele" is necessarily chaste and alluring, half nymph half warrior, and her clothes are accordingly the "white gown" ("bianca gonna") and the "armor of Pallas" ("armi di Palla"). In *Minerva pacifica* (circa 1510), a tapestry most probably executed after a drawing by Botticelli, Pallas wears a transparent gown, which partially unveils her slender body, her cuirass hanging from a tree; to the right, a shield with an image of the hideous Medusa hangs from the trunk of another tree (Fig. 18).<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the goddess in Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur* (circa 1482; Fig. 19) displays an almost diaphanous *gonna*, and, surrounding her breasts, branches of olive recreate the coiling



19 Sandro Botticelli,  
*Pallas and the Centaur*.  
Florence, Uffizi, Galleria  
delle Statue e delle Pitture

contro a costei, / contro a costei da cui con forza e 'ngegno, / se ver mi dice  
il sonno, avinto sei, / fa' sì del tuo furor mio pensier prego, / che spirito di  
pietà nel cor li crei: / mie virtù per se stessa ha l'ale corte, / perché troppo è  
'l valor di costei forte" (*ibidem*).

<sup>73</sup> For the tapestry and its relation to Botticelli's *standardo* for Giuliano de' Medici's 1475 joust, see Hermann Ullmann, "Eine verschollene Pallas Athena des Sandro Botticelli", in: *Bonner Studien: Aufsätze aus der Altertumswissenschaft Reinhard Kekulé zur Erinnerung an seine Lebribätigkeit in Bonn gewidmet von seinen Schülern*, Berlin 1890, pp. 203–213, esp. 205–211. See further Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York 1993, pp. 356f., and *Botticelli: Bildnis, Mythos, Andacht*, exh. cat., ed. by Andreas Schumacher, Frankfurt 2009, pp. 218–220, no. 27.

foliage that traditionally decorates the breast plate of ancient cuirasses. These are but a few examples of the many combinations of armor and gown that appear in late fifteenth-century representations of beautiful women.

In his “divine heads”, Michelangelo transcends the conventional interplay of “gown” and “armor” by dispensing with the former and occasionally animating or transfiguring the latter. Instead of the gown, the “*donna bella e crudele*” in Michelangelo’s drawings wears her own skin, which, in *Zenobia*, for instance, is magnified by the strip lining her bare chest: perhaps the vestige of armor. By the same token, the woman’s headgear in the drawing could be perceived as the remnant of a glorious helmet: a crest that conforms so closely to the contour of her head and neck that it renders her the analog of a crested beast, either a dragon or a basilisk. Her hypnotic, reptilian glare significantly enhances this impression.

In Michelangelo’s metaphorical fight with the “knight”, the beloved is all armor and Michelangelo is utter skin. As in the fiction staged in the Medici tournaments and in Poliziano’s *Stanze*, chastity is symbolized by the armor that keeps the lover at bay and secures the honor of the beloved. Michelangelo must have been conscious of this symbolism given his concerns with Cavalieri’s reputation and, in spite of this, his insistence on advertising his love for him in lyrical poems. However, even though the theme of the armed beloved was also meant to protect the good name of the man Michelangelo loved, the image of the “knight in armor” inflicting endless blows of bliss on the naked and cornered lover is fraught with such blatant masochism and self-indulgent eroticism that it crumbles the very foundations of courteous love as a cultural and social practice. What Michelangelo is conveying in a lyrical-chivalric terminology has little to do with the ideology that had produced the lyrical genre in the Tuscan vernacular. In Michelangelo’s joust of love, the nymph-warrior possesses the male traits of a knight, while the vanquished lover offers

himself nude, a state that, in the lyrical tradition, is consubstantial with the figure of the nymph through the intimation of her veil-gown (“leaving her bare in her white gown”).

Analogously, Michelangelo’s “divine heads” dislocate the principles specific to the late fifteenth-century lyrical visualization of the beautiful woman. If, on the one hand, the format remains unchanged and the panoply of attributes (veils and braids, brooches and filets, armor and snakes) is preserved, on the other hand Michelangelo reduces all of these props to ciphers of a personal obsession, incommensurable with the social protocol of the lyrical genre. In Michelangelo’s “*teste divine*”, the metaphorical epithets of cruel beauty cease to perform only as symbols by becoming the lively matter of carnal passion and aesthetic contemplation. The exceptionality of Michelangelo’s vision of love manifests itself through the idiosyncratic evocation (through re-combination, fragmentation, or animation) of the objects traditionally associated with the cruel woman. If the image of the snake dominates in Michelangelo’s “divine heads”, either literally or metaphorically, it is because his conception of love posits the serpent as more than just synonymous with woman’s cruelty: it is predominantly a self-referential symbol. Unlike his other gifts of drawings to Cavalieri (such as the *Abduction of Ganymede* and the *Punishment of Tityus*), the *Cleopatra* evacuates the mythological superstructure through which Michelangelo expounded his neo-Platonic and Plotinian concept of love by laying bare the carnal impulse intrinsic to beauty and desire.

In tracing the lineaments of his “divine heads”, Michelangelo was not only giving visual form to his inner vision of love; he was also constructing an image of himself as informed by beauty and desire. To a certain extent, the “*teste divine*” in their prodigious beauty are snapshots of Michelangelo’s unfolding visualization of self-perfection. As his passion for Cavalieri subsided over the years, Michelangelo was indeed led to introject the image of the beautiful woman, which

more insistently became an artistic ideal and a means of portraying the divine soul. The transition from a lyrical conception of love to a predominantly spiritual and aesthetic one was never achieved, but it seems to have compelled Michelangelo to explore the possibilities of the literary genre by stifling his interest in the creation of lyrical images: his “teste divine”. As a token of love and friendship, Michelangelo would now present his newest “*donna bella e crudele*”, Vittoria Colonna, with drawings of a sophisticated and personal devotional nature, such as the *Crucifixion* and the *Pietà*, both executed sometime between 1538 and 1545 (Figs. 20, 21).<sup>74</sup> And yet, in addition to being Michelangelo’s privileged interlocutor in matters of faith, Vittoria is all along connoted as the cruel and beautiful lady in Michelangelo’s poems. In a madrigal composed for Vittoria, the woman is portrayed as a sculptor: by taking away “the excess of his flesh / with its uncouth, crude, and hard shell”, she extracts the lover out of his metaphorical wrap.<sup>75</sup> By removing Michelangelo’s “shell” (which in previous sonnets had been assimilated with the scales of a snake and the cocoon of a silkworm), the woman finds the image of herself:

Just as the form, bereft of the perfected  
 Work, awaits to be filled up  
 With gold and silver melted through fire  
 And only by splitting produces the work,  
 So too do I through the fire  
 Of love fill my hollow desire  
 For the infinite beauty  
 Of the woman I worship,  
 Heart and soul of my frail life.  
 A lofty and welcome woman

<sup>74</sup> For these two drawings, see de Tolnay (note 2), III, pp. 66f., no. 411, and pp. 76–78, no. 426. See further Alexander Nagel, “Gifts for Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna”, in: *Art Bulletin*, LXXIX (1997), pp. 647f. For Michelangelo’s relation with Vittoria Colonna, see *Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, exh. cat., ed. by Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, Vienna 1997.

<sup>75</sup> “[...] cela il superchio della propria carne / co’ l’inculta sua cruda e dura scorza. / Tu pur dalle mie streme / parti puo’ sol levarne, / ch’in

Descends into me through such narrow slits  
 That I will break and burst to extract her.<sup>76</sup>

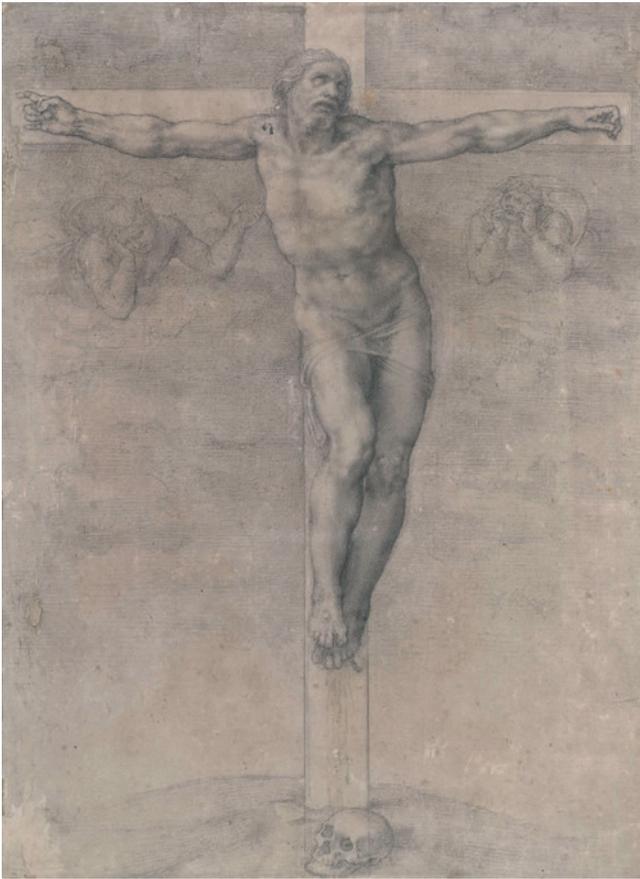
Michelangelo’s simile is clearly derived from the practice of metal casting. In the madrigal, the lover is not yet the inner mold encasing the image of the beautiful woman, but the outer mold that, from the outside, appears “uncouth, crude, and hard”. Through the eyes (“narrow slits”) beauty penetrates Michelangelo’s soul and impresses itself within it. Love is the force that refines and perfects the inner image. Though the analogy is slightly far-fetched, the persistence and imperishability of desire is the continuous outpouring of liquid gold and silver destined to solidify the outlined traits of the beloved in the lover’s heart; the fluid matter that, when hardened, constitutes the ultimate touch of the produced work.

The absorption of the woman’s portrait into both the lover’s soul and body is a topos of the lyrical tradition. Nevertheless, Michelangelo’s self-identification with the beautiful woman as the true image of his soul is rendered here so concretely and, in a sense, so brutally that it transgresses the playfulness and affected artistry of the contemporary lyrical tradition. Significantly, the madrigal subsumes the lyrical component within a spiritual and aesthetic aspiration. The woman’s cruelty expresses the impossibility for Michelangelo to achieve self-annihilation and redemption as well as his inability to contemplate beauty at its purest: that is, at its most divine. In other words, the “*donna crudele*” is no longer an object of persisting carnal passion.

This evolution in Michelangelo’s lyrical conception does not entirely explain why he seems to have

me non è di me voler né forza” (Buonarroti [note I], p. 82, no. 152 [333f.]).

<sup>76</sup> “Non pur d’argento o d’oro / vinto dal foco esser po’ piena aspetta / vota d’opra perfetta, / la forma che sol fratta il tragge fora; / tal io, col foco ancora / d’amor dentro ristoro / il desir voto di beltà infinita, / di coste’ ch’i’ adoro, / anima e cor della mie fragil vita. / Alta donna e gradita / in me discende per sì brevi spazi / c’a trarla fuor convien mi rompa e strazi” (*ibidem*, p. 83, no. 153 [334]).



20 Michelangelo Buonarroti,  
*Crucifixion*. London, British Museum,  
inv. 1895,0915.504

stopped executing “divine heads” as images of the beautiful woman even after his love for Cavalieri began to abate. In the throes of his infatuation with Cavalieri, Michelangelo had perhaps attempted the impossible: to circumscribe the nature of homosexual passion within an imagery centered around the exaltation of woman. If, in some poems, the celebration of Cavalieri results in an awkward blurring of the female and male features of the beloved, in the drawings, particularly in *Cleopatra*, Michelangelo’s imagery reaches a point of no return. No image of the “*donna bella e crudele*” had ever represented the paroxysm of carnal passion with such immediacy and simplicity. The outdated product of memory or the provocative instantiation of a lyric revival, the wom-



21 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*.  
Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum,  
inv. 1.2.0.16

an depicted in *Cleopatra* still belongs to a tradition, and certainly makes capital of it. At the same time, however, Michelangelo’s woman-snake is profoundly un-lyrical, for she tilts the balance of flesh and soul integral to the lyric genre. Indeed, the “*donna bella e crudele*” in the *Cleopatra* is nothing but pure, sublimated flesh.

In his final poems, Michelangelo progressively lost the vision of his beautiful and cruel woman or, more specifically, his gaze became focused on the Lord:

I pray you, make me see you everywhere!  
Then, if I feel I burn from mortal beauty  
My fire will be extinguished next to yours  
And I will be aflame in yours as I was before.

My dear Lord, I call and appeal only to you  
 Against my tormenting passion, blind and futile  
 You alone can renew me inside and out  
 My will, my judgment, and my meager strength!<sup>77</sup>

The image of beauty that had blessed and tortured Michelangelo throughout his life became in the end the image of the Savior: his relentless attempts to extricate, to disentangle, to reshape the effigy of the crucified Lord in his final drawings and unfinished sculptures was Michelangelo's way of objectifying that concept of love and image of self-perfection that for very long had presented itself in the form of the "donna bella e crudele".<sup>78</sup> It is perhaps not ironic that, while Petrarch's *Canzoniere* culminates in the vision of the Virgin as the true portrayal of love, Michelangelo's final poems end with a yearning contemplation of the Lord:

Neither painting nor sculpture can any longer  
 Appease my mind, turned to that divine love  
 That opened his arms on the cross to take us in.<sup>79</sup>

In his Florence *Pietà* (circa 1547–1553; Fig. 22) originally destined for his tomb, Michelangelo depicted himself as Nicodemus supporting Christ's dead body, fixing his deeply-sunken eyes upon the Savior as the exclusive object of his vision: the image of love impressed in his heart. The interconnection between Michelangelo/Nicodemus and Christ within the sculptural group is such that it pushes the Virgin out of focus: an effect that was even more conspicuous before Michelangelo hammered off the Savior's left leg.<sup>80</sup> The intensity, the almost exclusivity of Michelangelo's Christocentric devotion during the last two decades of



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 22 Michelangelo Buonarroti,  
*Pietà Bandini*. Florence, Museo  
 dell'Opera del Duomo

his life is charged with religious, cultural, social, and personal implications that have been comprehensively and thoughtfully explored by Michelangelo scholars.<sup>81</sup> But it would not be unfair to postulate that, alongside the seriousness and intricate density of Michelangelo's theology, there is a lyrical, even carnal, component in Michelangelo's ardent passion for Christ. For decades,

<sup>77</sup> "Deh fammiti vedere in ogni loco! / Se da mortal bellezza arder mi sento, / appresso al tuo mi sarà foco ispento, / e io nel tuo sarò, com'ero, in foco. / Signor mie caro, i' te sol chiamo e 'nvoco / contr'a l'inutil mie cieco tormento: / tu sol puo' rinnovarmi fuora e drento / le voglie e 'l senno e 'l valor lento e poco" (Buonarroti [note 1], p. 131, no. 274 [442f]). For the English translation, see Saslow (note 7), p. 463.

<sup>78</sup> For an analogous interpretation of these drawings, see Rosand (note 9), pp. 208–219.

<sup>79</sup> "Né pinger né scolpir fie più che quieti / l'anima, volta a quell'amor divino / c'aperse, a prender noi, 'n croce le braccia" (Buonarroti [note 1], p. 135, no. 285 [449–452]); for a similar concept, see *ibidem*, p. 87, no. 161 [344f].

<sup>80</sup> See my discussion in Lorenzo Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative: Dislocating the Istorica in Early Modern Painting*, London/Turnhout 2011, pp. 362–364.

<sup>81</sup> See Alexander Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art*, New York 2000;

the “*donna bella e crudele*” had acted as a device for self-concealment: not a smoke screen, but rather an ideological surrogate for Michelangelo’s love for men. The depiction of the beautiful woman had incarnated, but also dissimulated to the point of repression, Michelangelo’s attraction to the male body. In a sense, the staging in his final poems, drawings, and sculptures of Christ’s agonizing or dead body corresponds to the unveiling – admittedly, a sublimated one – of Michelangelo’s real object of passion. Through its divine appearance, the male body in its nudity was now ready for longing and contemplation as the quasi-logical conclusion of the Neoplatonic, theosophical concept of love that had inspired Michelangelo throughout his whole life: a concept of love that had served him to justify and cope with his ‘sinful’ attraction. The snake that had aspired, by shedding its scales, to have its naked skin wrapped within the shield of divine love can now be embraced within the arms of the crucified

Christ or, in turn, can support Christ’s dead, half-naked body before laying it upon the Virgin’s lap. The impossible fulfilment of Michelangelo’s desire – the cruelest aspect of his late passion – consists ultimately in the acute awareness that no work of art – neither drawn nor carved – could exorcise his obsessive vision of beauty: recreate divinity in the flesh of paper or marble no longer makes for the touch of love. Even as the matter of poetic aspiration, self-dissolution in the male divinity remains an unfulfilled theme in Michelangelo’s final poems: so much so that the *Rime* as a para-biographical project do not entail a conclusion. And yet, it is on the most original grounds that the cruel, blissful desire for male beauty was intended to become the epilogue of this Renaissance lyrical enterprise.

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Antonio Forcellino, *Michelangelo Buonarroti: storia di una passione eretica*, Turin 2002; Maria Forcellino, *Michelangelo, Vittoria Colonna e gli “spirituali”*, Rome

2009; and, more recently, Sarah Rolfe Prodan, *Michelangelo’s Christian Mysticism: Spirituality, Poetry, and Art in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, New York 2014.

Between the mid 1520s and 1533, Michelangelo executed a group of drawings conceived as gifts for Gherardo Perini and, in particular, Tommaso Cavalieri. Praising their exceptional craftsmanship, Giorgio Vasari refers to these drawings as “divine heads” (“teste divine”). In this essay, the author focuses only on three of these drawings (the so-called *Cleopatra* and *Zenobia* in Florence and the *Ideal head* in the British Museum, London), more specifically on those representing full-size heads or busts of beautiful women characterized by strange hair dresses and hairdos and by unusual pieces of armor. By stressing the links between lyrical motifs developed by Michelangelo in his love poems (*Rime*) and visual motifs present in these drawings, the author seeks to offer a new interpretation of Michelangelo’s “divine heads”. The essay intends to demonstrate that Michelangelo’s imagery of the “*donna bella e crudele*” relies on a late fifteenth-century Florentine tradition to which numerous artists had contributed: from Piero di Cosimo to Botticelli and Verrocchio. Interpreting Michelangelo’s lyrical output as an unaccomplished para-biographical trajectory modeled on Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, the author also clarifies in which ways Michelangelo’s lyric poetry differs from previous and contemporary examples, and how the figure of the “*donna bella e crudele*” is replaced (in Michelangelo’s final years) by a contemplation of Christ’s divine body.

*The Trustees of the British Museum, London: Figs. 1, 2, 13, 16, 17, 20.* — *Scala, Florence/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Rome/Art Resource, New York: Fig. 3.* — *Gallerie degli Uffizi, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, Florence: Fig. 4.* — *Scala, Florence/Art Resource, New York: Figs. 5, 6, 8, 9, 14, 19, 22.* — *Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York: Fig. 7.* — *National Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York: Fig. 10.* — *Städel Museum, Frankfurt on the Main/U. Edelmann/Artothek, Weilheim: Fig. 11.* — *Minneapolis Museum of Art: Fig. 12.* — *Victoria and Albert Museum, London: Fig. 15.* — *From Botticelli: Bildnis, Mythos, Andacht (note 73): Fig. 18.* — *Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston: Fig. 21.*